

BAGHDAD AND BEIRUT

What Set Loose the Voice of the People

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BEIRUT, Lebanon — In memory, the two scenes are linked by their silence. Last week in downtown Beirut, Lebanese by the hundreds filed past the tomb of Rafik Hariri, the fallen national leader, each pausing to offer some unspoken tribute. The only audible sound was a murmured prayer for the dead.

In Baghdad two months before, Iraqis in similar numbers had waited in line outside a high school to cast their ballots. Mortar shells were exploding in the distance, yet hardly anyone uttered a sound.

Amid such overwhelming displays of popular will, it seemed that words were hardly necessary.

Only weeks apart and a few hundred miles away, the popular demonstrations in Lebanon and Iraq offer themselves up for such comparisons. Their proximity suggests a connection, possibly one of cause and effect, like the revolutions that swept Eastern Europe in 1989. As went Berlin, Prague and Bucharest; so goes Baghdad, Beirut and Cairo.

President Bush has asserted as much, arguing that the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the holding of elections in Iraq set loose the democratic idea and sent the tyrannies reeling. From a distance, Lebanon looks like a domino.

Up close, though, it seems like something far more complex. For a correspondent who has spent much of the past two years inside Iraq, arriving in the seaside capital of Beirut is a bracing and abrupt experience. For all the glories of election day, Iraq is still a grim and deadly place, where the traumas of the past 30 years are imprinted in the permanent frowns of ordinary Iraqis. Lebanon, by contrast, seems Iraq's sunny, breezy cousin, where young men arrive at demonstrations wearing blazers and hair gel, and the women high heels and navel rings. When the protest is finished, they drive off together in their BMW's.

How could Iraq have inspired this?

Chibli Mallat, a Beirut lawyer and opposition leader, has an answer. He believes that for years, Iraq stood as both a positive and malevolent symbol to others in the Middle East. Saddam Hussein's survival following the Persian Gulf war in 1991, Mr. Mallat said, froze the status quo in the region for more than a decade. The Iraqi dictator's prolific human rights abuses had the perverse effect of making every other unelected leader in the Middle East look tame by comparison. The result, he said, was political stasis.

"Saddam's survival created an atmosphere where people literally got away with murder," Mr. Mallat said. "His removal became a precondition for change in the region."

When the Americans finally returned to topple Mr. Hussein two years ago, and, more important, when millions of Iraqis risked their lives to cast ballots in January, the country emerged as a symbol for change across the region.

"Suddenly, there was a demand for democracy," Mr. Mallat said.

Mr. Mallat's view, compelling though it is, is a minority one in Lebanon. Most Lebanese will tell you that Iraq had nothing to do with the popular upheaval now gripping the country, and not just because they opposed the American invasion of their Arab neighbor. Unlike Iraq, Lebanon has been a functioning democracy since 1990, when the civil war, which killed 100,000 people, finally came to an end. Lebanon's press is vibrant, with newspapers and television stations largely free to criticize the government in Arabic, English and French. While Iraq still requires billions of dollars to repair its crumbling public works, Lebanon, thanks in no small way to Mr. Hariri's efforts, has largely rebuilt itself.

Indeed, it is no accident that the main slogan of the Lebanese opposition is not "Democracy," but "Sovereignty, Independence and Freedom." The goal is to expel Syrian forces, who have been in Lebanon for 30 years.

At least to an outsider, the main difference between Iraq and Lebanon seems not just Iraq's inexperience with democracy, but its all too dreadful experience with terror. In Iraq, political discourse often seems stunted, if less by a lack of practice than by the lingering shadow of Mr. Hussein. In Lebanon, with some exceptions - like the subject of Syria and its Lebanese client, President Emile Lahoud - most citizens are well accustomed to speaking their minds. In the last few weeks, most of the remaining taboos have fallen away.

"We want the truth," said Naila Shukry, a biology student at Arab University in Beirut. "Someone has murdered our leader, and we want to know who is responsible."

The more extensive experience with democracy has allowed the Lebanese to develop a discourse that seems far more nuanced and sophisticated than the one practiced by their counterparts in Iraq, where people are still testing the rudiments of debate. In Iraq, elections began the democratic process; here, it has already been many years in the making.

When Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the militant Hezbollah organization, addressed a rally of his supporters in downtown Beirut earlier this month, he stood in front of a Lebanese flag rather than the group's trademark banner, green and yellow with a fist and a Kalashnikov rifle. The change, seen on television, prompted a good deal of chatter in Lebanon's political classes about Mr. Nasrallah's intentions. Whatever he meant, such a political moment is inconceivable in Iraq today.

"Here we already have a democracy," said Mustafa Salha, a 40-year-old worker in a plastic factory who had come to visit Mr. Hariri's tomb. "Iraq didn't have anything to do with that."

Indeed, the goal of those taking to the streets in Lebanon has not so much been the beginning of democracy, but rather a better democracy than what they already have. The way to get that, most Lebanese seem to agree, is to expel the Syrian forces and by so doing end that country's overweening influence here. The Lebanese have tolerated that presence for years, buying into the notion that the Syrians brought them stability in exchange for their putting up with Syrian power to veto most important political decisions.

As their democracy matured, more and more Lebanese came to regard the Syrian presence as a rotten bargain. Last September, when the Syrian government engineered the extension of Mr. Lahoud's term, the discontent became acute.

Enter the government of the United States. In an echo of the ambivalence many Iraqis feel about the American presence in their country, many Lebanese are skeptical of American intentions. Not least among their reasons is what they regard as the acquiescence of the United States to the continuation of Syria's military presence here in 1990, in exchange for Syria's joining the coalition that was then being built to oust Mr. Hussein from Kuwait.

"The Syrians had a mandate from the United States" to keep their troops in Lebanon, said a former Lebanese minister who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

For many Lebanese, what made significant change possible in Lebanon was not the elections in Iraq, but the events of Sept. 11, 2001, which prompted the Bush administration to re-examine its reluctance to challenge the Syrian regime, as well as other Arab dictatorships that had backed terrorist groups. When the Lebanese began calling for a Syrian withdrawal, the Syrian government had to defy not just the Lebanese people, but the United States as well.

For that reason, more than a few Lebanese believe, President Bush's demands are proving decisive in driving the Syrians out. "This enthusiasm for democracy may not happen again," said Khalil Karam, professor of international relations at University of St. Joseph here, speaking of American foreign policy. "Without it, we could not stop Syria."

Back at Mr. Hariri's tomb, Mr. Salha, the factory worker, offered his own grudging invitation, if only to ensure that his homeland finally frees itself of Syrian domination.

"We are not against Bush," Mr. Salha said. "If he wants to make us safe and free, that's great. Let him do it."